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Rachele Dini

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<sup>1</sup> The anonymous narrator of Donald Barthelme's "The Rise of Capitalism" (1970) opens his story by saying he has made a mistake (198). He thought he had understood capitalism, but now realizes it eludes his grasp. In the ensuing ten passages, the narrator taking the reader through a series of increasingly bizarre scenes populated by factory employees, monarchs, Catholic saints, the woman to whom his story is directed, and the members of a country club. The events he narrates are startling. "Honoré de Balzac [goes] to the movies," he states (200). "Capitalism ar[ises] and [takes] off its pyjamas" (201). Meanwhile, the narrator bemoans various current crises, including the allegedly polluted state of the Ganges, which he attributes to the by-products of the Western wig factories that line it:

Strands of raven hair floating on the surface of the Ganges. Why can't they clean up the Ganges? If the wealthy capitalists who operate the Ganges wig factories could be forced to install sieves, at the mouths of their plants. And now the sacred Ganges is choked with hair, and the river no longer knows where to put its flow, and the moonlight on the Ganges is swallowed by the hair, and the water darkens. By Vishnu! This is an intolerable situation! Shouldn't something be done about it? (201)

- <sup>2</sup> From this proto-environmentalist diatribe, the scene cuts to a dinner party of generic bourgeoisie discussing capitalism over crudités and elegant place settings, while parenthetically considering the value of human beings:

Friends for dinner! The crudités are prepared, green and fresh. The good paper napkins are laid out. Everyone is talking about capitalism (although some people are talking about the psychology of aging, and some about the human use of human beings, and some about the politics of experience). (201)

- 3 Capitalism, Barthelme posits, is both insidious and intangible. Its language and logic permeate every aspect of Western culture, while its physical by-products clog the arteries of the earth, as vividly rendered by the allusion to the environmental impact of the West's outsourcing of manufacturing to the developing world. The story's anonymous voices and plot-less narrative give expression to a cultural context from which truth and meaning are obscured. The only certainty, Barthelme suggests, lies in our capacity to make mistakes and bad decisions that will most likely wreak havoc, and in our ability to turn the physical remnants of those choices into something approximating a narrative.

4 Barthelme's story is paradigmatic of a broader preoccupation with waste and aesthetic re-use that runs throughout his fiction. It is also emblematic of Barthelme's experimental approach to form: his fiction is characterized by fragmented, montage-like narratives that appear driven less by plot than by chance, and in which characters frequently resort to the rhetoric of advertising and marketing to make their points. The fascination with waste objects, incompleteness and re-purposing that permeates Barthelme's work bears the imprint of Surrealism and, more broadly, what Peter Bürger defines as the "historical avant-garde"—those movements including Surrealism and Dada that sought, through their radical experimentations, to democratise art, re-imbue it with political purpose and thus counter the influence of capitalist commodity culture (Bürger, 28). Artists associated with these movements often borrowed from the culture they critiqued, either through the use of mass-produced objects as exemplified by Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* series, or through the re-purposing of cast-offs, to which they attributed new aesthetic or metaphysical value (Bürger, 72 and 49; Chipp, 366-455; Waldman, 10). André Breton's concept of the found object, for instance, hinged on ascribing new meanings to discards found on the street. Seeking out these meanings required approaching the object in something other than commercial terms, in what Elizabeth Wilson has termed a "modern materialism" or "Surrealist Marxism" that aimed to "dissolve the distinctions between the material and the ideal" (62-63). The novels of Breton and his contemporaries sought to apply this logic: Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926) and Breton's *Nadja* (1928) and *Mad Love* (1935) are essentially stories about urban pilgrimages, in which the cast-offs of consumer society provide clues to an alternative way of being. The first-person narrator in *Nadja* describes how he enjoys haunting the Saint-Ouen flea market, where he goes "searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse" (52).

5 Barthelme's fiction, and particularly his first novel, *Snow White* (1967), extends this approach to critique consumerism and the encroachment of advertising and marketing rhetoric into every facet of public life, adding to it an element of ecological consciousness absent in the work of his predecessors. In doing so, Barthelme reclaims waste to create radically innovative narrative forms that seek to challenge the status quo. This paper explores the interplay between waste and value in *Snow White*, paying particular attention to the role of physical waste objects in his work. While studies of the relationship between waste and the governing aesthetic of *Snow White* abound, these discussions focus on Barthelme's deployment of "verbal waste"—advertising slogans, slang and patois, and sentence fragments—while they read the physical waste in his work allegorically. William Gass' oft-quoted summary of Barthelme's project as "constructing a single plane of truth, of relevance, of style, of value—a flatland junkyard—since anything dropped in the dreck is dreck, at once, as an uneaten porkchop mislaid in the garbage" is emblematic of critics' focus on the semantic slippage between "trash" or "low-brow" culture and actual waste,

and the tendency to overlook the actual physical waste objects in his work (Gass, 101).<sup>i</sup> Of course, this is not to discount the significance of such readings. The preponderance of references in Barthelme's work to news events, advertising, and television, and the frequent parodying of marketing rhetoric indeed exemplifies the tendency Paul Maltby identifies in "dissident" or countercultural fiction under late capitalism, which "explore [s] the political and ideological implications" of a cultural landscape suffused with "conceptually impoverished discourses" (37; 30). My aim is to demonstrate how a literal reading of Barthelme's representations of waste might complement these analyses of verbal effluvia, and shed new light on his work. Through the dual lenses of New Materialism and waste theory, I will consider the extent to which *Snow White*'s radicalism depends upon a radical understanding of material waste as a fluid and dynamic category.

<sup>6</sup> Waste scholarship tends to approach waste either from a Douglasian perspective, as "matter out of place," or from a Thompsonian one, as a temporal category—a thing which an object becomes once it has lost its original value (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 203; Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 7).<sup>ii</sup> In *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson classifies objects as "transient" (objects that will eventually lose their use-value), "durable" (objects such as antiques that accrue value), and "rubbish," which are objects of no value (Thompson, 9). To my mind, this latter approach is a more fruitful way of conceiving of something that in Barthelme's novels is in fact both unfixed and fundamentally unstable. Arjun Appadurai's conceptualization of commodities as "things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterize many different kinds of thing, at different points in their social lives" suggests how waste itself might be viewed as a phase or process (Appadurai, 3–63). Where Appadurai argues the merits of acknowledging "the commodity potential of all things" I argue that Barthelme's work, like that of his avant-gardist predecessors, is acutely concerned with the waste potential of all things. His narratives hinge on foreshadowing the imminent obsolescence of the objects his characters use and decoding the things they have discarded. This reading owes much to recent developments in New Materialism, a field concerned with what Jane Bennett terms the "vitality" or "agentic capacity" of matter, which is to say the capacity of the nonhuman to participate in and even determine the course of human events (4). As Maurizia Boscagli describes it, where historical materialism sees matter's fate under capital as "invariably one of commodification and reification," New Materialism explores the fluidity of *all* matter, including commodities (24). Such an approach provides a new way into understanding waste in Barthelme as a phase or process in an object's life that is dialectically inseparable from its life as a commodity or use-value. Under capitalist exchange relations, the one is capable of being alchemized into the other—waste can be mended, re-purposed, or granted the status of collectable or antique, while a commodity can, at the proverbial blink of an eye, become obsolete. Barthelme's fiction is at pains to understand the implications of this duality.

<sup>7</sup> Barthelme was not the only novelist of the 1960s and 70s to consider the relationship between shortened product cycles and the growth of landfills. Much of Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963) takes place in the sewers of Manhattan, where protagonist Benny Profane has been hired to hunt a swarm of alligators (43). The alligators are the physical outcome of a passing fad: the fashion for baby alligator pets among the children of the Manhattan elite, which, once over, led to them being flushed down the toilet. Profane is in turn aware that once he has killed all of the alligators, he will be out of a job. Pynchon thus parodies progressive obsolescence and the cycles of employment and

redundancy. Commodity culture's excretions, out of sight, are not out of mind. The traces they leave remind us of the fickleness of our market-driven desires, while literally breeding new forms (146; 148). The entire plot of Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), is driven by a quest for a grail-like mailbox, which is eventually revealed to be nothing more than a trash can with the painted initials "W.A.S.T.E." Every object in the novel, including the mail box-trash can, is entirely self-referential, as attested by the acronym of W.A.S.T.E, which is ultimately shown to stand for nothing but itself. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) approaches waste from a very different perspective: in the novel, Marco Polo tells the emperor Kublai Khan about Leonia, a city defined less by the things its inhabitants produce, than by those they excrete to "make room for the new," and by the sense of purification resulting from such disposal (114). Calvino posits consumer waste as a threat to our assumptions about sovereignty: the ultimate irony of capitalist imperialism is that its posterity is measured in rubbish. Finally, William Gaddis' *JR* (1975) is populated by valueless stock options, unfinished manuscripts of dubious worth, and piles of unsold inventory, which serve to parody the increasing reliance of capitalist economies on speculation following the de-regulation of the financial markets and unpegging of the gold standard.<sup>iii</sup> Amplifying and complicating the interrogations of over-consumption that Pynchon, Calvino and Gaddis raise, and extending the experimental approaches of the historical avant-garde, Barthelme's fiction reclaims waste to critique commodity culture's insidious effects, while creating a radically new aesthetic.

<sup>8</sup> *Snow White*, as its title suggests, is a fairy-tale pastiche that situates the 1937 Disney version of Snow White in modern-day New York. Barthelme re-casts Snow White's seven dwarfs as labourers Bill, Clem, Hubert, Henry, Kevin, Edward and Dan, who earn their living by manufacturing Chinese baby food and washing buildings (except for Dan, who works at a plastic hump-making plant). The dwarfs share a passion for "dreck," the Yiddish word for excrement, nonsense or junk, and whose first known use in English was James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Gold, 218). While the dwarfs work or ponder the hidden value of waste, Snow White tends to the housekeeping (111). And in their leisure time, they all enjoy sex together in the shower. The novel's villains are Jane, "the evil stepmother figure," and Hogo, a millionaire who has fitted a General Motors advertisement into the ceiling of his mansion but disposes of his garbage by throwing it out of the window (82 and 134). Like Barthelme's short fiction, *Snow White* is disjointed and at times even nonsensical, featuring partial dialogues, brief vignettes, odd lists of seemingly unrelated objects and frequent references to waste and its disposal. And it is very funny. Considered by many to be the archetypal postmodernist text, it has more recently been recognised as a descendant of the historical avant-garde.<sup>iv</sup> Barthelme himself acknowledged this debt in an interview with *The Paris Review* published in the summer of 1981, in which he recalled receiving a copy of Marcel Raymond's *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* from his father (a renowned modernist architect), and noted the enduring influence of Surrealism on his work (O'Hara, 187). In the same interview, Barthelme described his fondness for "all the filth on the streets" of New York, elaborating:

it reminds me of Kurt Schwitters. Schwitters used to hang around printing plants and fish things out of waste barrels, stuff that had been overprinted or used during makeready, and he'd employ this rich accidental material in his collages. I saw a very large Schwitters show some years ago and almost everything in it reminded me of New York. Garbage in, art out (202).

- 9 The testimonial is fascinating not only in its suggestion one bring Schwitters' aesthetic to bear on Barthelme's work, but in its suggestion that *all* city writing, if not the urban experience itself, has been indelibly shaped by the historical avant-garde and its appreciation for waste: to view collage is to be reminded of urban waste, and to view urban waste is to be reminded of collage. The two are intertwined. This identification of the inherent interrelation of the historical avant-garde, the city and waste is key to Barthelme's aesthetic, as is the notion that the fiction writer, like the collage artist, might put waste to aesthetic use. The latter is comically voiced by a character in Barthelme's story, "See the Moon" (1966), who envies painters, since:

They can pick up a Baby Ruth wrapper on the street, glue it to the canvas (in the right place, of course, there's that), and lo! People crowd about and cry "A real Baby Ruth wrapper, by God, what could be realer than that!" Fantastic metaphysical advantage... Fragments are the only forms I trust.' (91)

- 10 Waste on the street is in fact more authentic than any representation, and fragments convey truth more than a whole. Barthelme's own predilection for collage is well-documented—he explained it at length in a series of correspondences with Jerome Klinkowitz between 1971 and 1972, and confessed, in the introduction to *Guilty Pleasures* (1974) his "secret vice" of "cutting up and pasting together pictures." (Roe, 98; Barthelme, 1). It would likewise be difficult to name a text of his that does not make reference to waste and its potential hidden meanings. The fragment-loving character in his short story "See the Moon" mounts old objects from his past onto his wall in the hope that they will "will someday merge, blur—cohere is the word, maybe—into something meaningful. A grand word meaningful" (91). "Brain Damage" (1970) opens with the narrator recounting his discovery of a book "in the first garbage dump," implying that each of the following disjointed passages takes place in other, different, dumps (149). "Sakrete" (1983) recounts a male artist's efforts, at his wife's instigation, to find out who has been stealing the neighbourhood garbage cans (193). Perhaps most famously, "The Indian Uprising" (1965), which imagines the defeat of the US empire by a tribe of Native Americans and their ghetto-dwelling allies, features multiple references to pollution, mobile garbage dumps and barricades made out of household items (102-108), which the story's first reviewers assumed to be references to the New York City garbage crisis and critiques of "the sense of unreality created by television when newsreels of carnage run smoothly into advertisements for the good life" (Kroll, 112; "Social Science Fiction," 106). In each of these instances, Barthelme deploys waste to disrupt the narrative and hint at a broader malaise underlying popular culture. Philip Nel's contention that "The Rise of Capitalism" "behaves like modern advertisements, sending a knowing wink toward the prospective consumer, an invitation to partake of a hip ironic awareness" can in fact be extended to Barthelme's *oeuvre* more broadly (84). His texts, as Nel says of "The Rise of Capitalism," provide a "satiric take on both Marxist critiques of capitalism and naïve boosters of capitalism"—an interplay that results in a "potent radicalism... cloak[ed in] humor" (84). Moreover, as many scholars besides Nel have argued, the co-option, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, of the avant-gardist forms of collage and montage by the culture industry essentially depoliticised them.<sup>v</sup> In deploying these same strategies in his own social critiques, Barthelme also reclaims their radical potential. His work is thus recuperative on two levels, re-purposing waste objects as well as reclaiming the radicalism of the historical avant-garde's formal devices, including the reclamation of waste.

11

A late scene in *Snow White* provides a salient example of the role of waste objects in the novel. Faced with the quandary of disposing of a "well-known aesthetician" tasked with judging the merits of their shower curtain, the dwarfs contemplate shredding him in their electric wastebasket:

The electric wastebasket is a security item. Papers dropped into it are destroyed instantly. How the electric wastebasket accomplishes this is not known. An intimidation followed by a demoralization eventuating in a disintegration, one assumes. It is not emptied. There are not even ashes. It functions with a quiet hum digesting whatever we do not wish to fall into the hands of the enemy [sic]. The record of Bill's trial when he is tried will go into the electric wastebasket. When we considered the destruction of the esthetician we had in mind the electric wastebasket. First dismemberment, then the electric waste basket. That there are in the world electric wastebaskets is encouraging. (135)

- 12 Note the meticulous description of the basket and the dwarfs' enthusiasm for its numerous, more or less classified, functions. This is but one of many passages in which the reader is alerted to the bureaucratic nature of Barthelme's dwarfs, with their staunch work ethic (Bill, the only one to leave a vat of baby food unattended, is dutifully tried and hanged) and their adhesion to strict rules and rigorous research methods. Indeed, the above-mentioned aesthetician is only deemed unsuitable and hence to be disposed of because he lacks a reputable methodology with which to adjudicate value, thus casting doubt on the "truth" of his judgement—that theirs is, in fact, the "best" curtain. Likewise, the reference to "First dismemberment, then the electric wastebasket" brings to mind the efficiency of the electric chair. What Larry McCaffery describes as of Barthelme's tendency to confront his characters with "worn-out systems [that] fail to operate successfully" (104) is embodied in a technological device that removes all trace of past mistakes, or those who make them, including the out-dated criteria by which aesthetic value itself is judged. The passage's comedy lies in the idea of disposing with those in charge of deciding what is worth keeping—a fine solution for dealing with one's critics!

13

The heart of Barthelme's conceptualization of waste and value can be found in the novel's oft-quoted landfill scene. Here, Dan discusses the "'blanketing' effect of ordinary language"—those words that "fill in" sentences rather than straightforwardly signifying—and claims their value: "That part, the 'filling' you might say, of which the expression 'you might say' is a good example" is "the most interesting part" as it comprises the largest part of our exchanges (111). The seemingly value-less has value. One is reminded of Franco Moretti's conceptualization, after Roland Barthes, of narrative "fillers"—those non-events that furnish the nineteenth-century novel without our really noticing them (Moretti, 364-399; Barthes, 141-148). In his seminal study of realism, "The Reality Effect," which was published the same year as *Snow White*, Barthes distinguishes between narrative episodes with a cardinal function ("nuclei") and the unimportant things that occur between them ("catalysers"). Moretti uses these to trace the evolution of narrative description in the nineteenth-century novel, which he argues came to attend to both "nuclei" which he calls "turning points," and "catalysers" which he re-names "fillers" (380). The narrative filler's role is to help convey time's passage and amplify the narrative's realism without actually modifying it, thus offering up a circumscribed sense of uncertainty that effectively channels what Max Weber termed the bourgeois logic of rationalization under capitalism (Weber, 154, as cited by Moretti, 381). Fillers enable the



author to "*rationaliz[e] the novelistic universe: turning it in to a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all*" (Weber, 154, emphasis added by Moretti).

14

In this passage, however, it is not the value of objects that is in question: it is the narrative value of the individual words used to identify those objects. What other value can a word have, beyond advancing plot or meaning? Perhaps it depends on what Dan the dwarf means by "the 'blanketing' effect of ordinary language." In the context of a novel in which characters constantly parrot the language of corporate board meetings, advertisements, and market forecasts, the reader can assume the expression refers to the proliferation of commercially inflected discourses that emerged during the post-war boom, and that Barthelme and many of his contemporaries sought to expose as vacuous, meaningless "trash." It is what Barthelme himself describes in one of his last essays as the "pressure on language from contemporary culture in the broadest sense—I mean our devouring commercial culture—which results in a double impoverishment: theft of complexity from the reader, theft of the reader from the writer" (Barthelme, 15). Put differently, Dan confronts the reader with what Maltby terms the proliferation of "easily consumable" language forms and "diminished use-value of language" resulting from late capitalism's emphasis on maintaining and improving the conditions of commodity production and consumption (36; 57; 54).

15

Dan suggests as much when he draws a parallel between the "stuffing" of this ordinary language and the plastic buffalo humps produced by his manufacturing plant:

[T]he per-capita production of trash in this country is up from 2.75 pounds per day in 1920 to 4.5 pounds per day in 1965, the last year for which we have figures, and is increasing at the rate of about 4% a year... I hazard that we may very well soon reach a point where it's 100%. Now at such a point, you will agree, the question turns from a question of disposing of this 'trash' to a question of appreciating its qualities... because it's all there is, and we will simply have to learn how to 'dig' it—that's slang, but peculiarly appropriate here. So that's why we're in humps, right now, more really from a philosophical point of view than because we find them a great money-maker. They are 'trash,' and what in fact could be more useless or trash-like? It's that we want to be on the leading edge of this trash phenomenon... and that's why we pay particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon. (112)

- 16 Dan presents the reader with a system of equivalences. The logic governing the mass production of the "useless" plastic buffalo humps is the same, essentially misguided, logic governing mass consumption and mass disposal, which are, in turn, driven by the language of mass marketing and mass media. The interrelation of meaningless lexicons, material waste and mass production of useless products in this passage goes some way towards explaining scholars' abiding fascination with Barthelme's "verbal waste" and the interpretation of his *oeuvre* as piecing together and imbuing new meaning in popular culture's discards. Such readings however tend to obscure the causal relationship between the mountains of waste described by Dan and the language—in the form of advertising campaigns and market research reports—that has contributed to their growth. The invitation to appreciate the hidden qualities of trash is an exhortation to recognize not only the verbal trash of commercial culture *but the physical relics that testify to its power*. Barthelme draws attention to the symbiotic relationship between marketing-speak and the remainders of products purchased and disposed of at its behest. There is thus an underlying radical potential in Dan's contention that the objects circulating from



factory to shop floor to home to landfill have a narrative, perhaps even anthropological, value—what Barthelme once described in interview, in relation to the barricade of relics in "The Indian Uprising," as "an archaeological slice" of culture (O'Hara, 199).

17

This becomes clearer when one considers the extent to which Barthelme recognizes, and in fact gestures towards, the status of his own texts as physical entities and commodities. A page-long description of Snow White's scouring of the dwarfs' books to rid them of "book lice" underscores the volumes' physicality, positing them as objects that must be cleaned and looked after if they are to escape the Thompsonian category of "rubbish" (Thompson, 9). But Barthelme then undermines this by specifying that Snow White is cleaning the books with a "5% solution of DDT" (Barthelme, 1967, 43). Why, the reader might ask, is Snow White spraying these books with the toxic pesticide that was made infamous, and subsequently banned, following Rachel Carson's revelation in 1962 of its carcinogenic effects? First published in three instalments of *The New Yorker* (the magazine for which Barthelme regularly wrote), Carson's *Silent Spring* described in minute detail the effects of DDT on animal (including human) tissue, and is generally credited with spawning the environmental movement in the United States, augmenting existing anxieties about the effects of super-industrialization, and influencing much of the American subculture of the 1960s and 70s (MacFarlane, 86). Barthelme would thus have been familiar with the book, and DDT's dangers. His figuration of his fairy-tale housewife spraying "book lice" with the twentieth century's most powerful and maligned chemical fertilisers is almost Beckettian in its absurdity, re-enacting the absurdity of the original DDT scandal: that the thing meant to prevent crops being consumed by pests and becoming waste was in fact a mass killer. It can likewise be seen as a comment on the erosion of culture, embodied, here, in a library being given cancer by one of modernity's failed attempts at efficiency.

18

However, Maurizia Boscagli's identification, after Zygmunt Bauman, of the ontological threat to hygiene, security, and stable categories that waste in modernity is perceived to pose, provides another way of reading the passage. Boscagli notes how:

Trash, refusing to give up its foreignness and otherness, becomes a threat, for it suspends any opposition between a classificatory order and the chaos of hybridity. The spaces and time scales of waste are disturbing because they seem to collapse in the *métissage* of a new category. Disused or decaying matter, in its liminality, plasticity, and abjection, occupies space in new, unexpected ways. (231)

- 19 From this perspective, the eradication of book lice and effort to preserve the books in their current state reads as an attempt to resist hybridity and ambiguity. It is an attempt to prevent the books from "breeding" new and unfamiliar forms or devolving into something "other". Snow White's cleaning of the books is not only ecologically unsound and absurdly toxic in a literal sense. It reads as a fascistic attempt at maintaining order and the status quo: in this case, the categories of good literature and bad, of classical fairy tales and "contaminated" ones such as the adulterated version of *Snow White* the reader holds in their hands. The irony of course is that that adulteration has already occurred: there is nothing this fairy tale heroine can do to undo the corruption of the story in which she is housed. From a New Materialist perspective, then, the passage reads as a parody of the role of consumerism and the lexicons of hygiene and efficiency in the environmental crisis, but also as a comment on capitalist modernity's peculiar affection

for fixed categories of value/worthlessness, cleanliness/uncleanliness, which exists alongside a paradoxical de-valuation of language and literature.

20

A similarly absurd meditation on the physicality, value, and (limited) durability of books occurs in the following passage:

I read Dampfboot's novel although he had nothing to say. It wasn't rave, that volume; we regretted that. And it was hard to read, dry, breadlike pages that turned, and then fell, like a car burned by rioters and resting, wrong side up, at the edge of the picture plane with its tires smoking. Fragments kept flying off the screen into the audience, fragments of rain and ethics. Hubert wanted to go back to the dog races. But we made him read his part, the outer part where the author is praised and the price quoted. We like books with a lot of dreck in them, matter that presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of 'sense' of what is going on. This 'sense' is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves—looking at them and so arriving at a feeling of... having read them, of having 'completed' them. (112)

- 21 Reading Dampfboot's novel is "hard" as in difficult to read, but it is also hard to the touch, like dry bread. The pages turning are analogous to "a car burned by rioters and resting, wrong side up, at the edge of the picture plane," a startling image that brings to mind *Compte de Lautréamont's* description, oft-quoted by the Surrealists, of a youth's beauty as "the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella" (263). But then the pages-qua-burning car becomes, in the next sentence, a movie screen from which fragments of "rain" and "ethics" fly, and then a physical book once more, identifiable by the promotional material and price on the back cover. Each sentence undermines the meaning of the last as well as the physical shape, genre, and form of the text discussed. Together with the ensuing explanation of the dwarfs' preferred reading material, the passage self-consciously gestures towards the ambiguous form and content of the novel the reader holds in his/her hands, which is similarly composed of "matter that presents itself as not wholly relevant." The dwarfs' preference for literature that does not require one to "rea[d] between the lines (for there is nothing there, only white spaces)" is both a playful recommendation and a reminder of the novel's own status as a physical object, of which some aspects, such as the lines of text, are worth more than others (for example, the space between them).

22

These different meditations on value and waste coalesce in a consumer survey with which the reader is faced midway through the novel:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes () No ()
2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes () No ()
3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes () No ()
4. That Jane is the wicked stepmother? Yes () No ()
5. In the further development of the story, would you like more () or less emotion? ()
- ....
8. Would you like a war? Yes () No ()
- ....
13. Holding in mind all works of fiction since the War, in all languages, how would you rate the present work, on a scale of one to ten, so far? (Please circle your answer) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
14. Do you stand up when you read? (Lie down? () Sit? ())

15. In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? () Two sets of shoulders? () Three? () (82-83).

- 23 The passage parodies the concepts of the consumer survey and consumer research, which emerged as a discipline in the late 1950s out of the earlier field of "motivation research," which combined anthropology, sociology, and clinical psychology to understand consumer behaviour (Fullerton, 212-222).<sup>vi</sup> Among the earliest instances of such research were Franklin B. Evans' 1959 study of the personality differences of Chevrolet and Ford owners, which challenged established ideas regarding automobile brand imagery and, more importantly, raised public awareness of the discipline, and Arthur Koponen's 1960 study of 9,000 cigarette smokers, which found that male cigarette smokers scored higher than average in their needs for aggression, achievement, sex, and dominance (Evans, 340-369; Koponen, 6-12). The passage's comedic element stems from its treatment of literature as a product to be improved upon by finding out what the reader-qua-customer wants, and from the suggestion that the writer apply the basic principles of consumer research to ensure their book's success. It exemplifies in fact what Paul Maltby terms the "triumph of banalization" at play in much of Barthelme's work: that is, the tendency of his texts to critique the culture of late capitalism by mimicking, or making use of, its debased language forms (69-70). Barthelme's survey both demonstrates the economic imperative underlying cultural production under late capitalism, and makes fun of it, asking the reader to assist in the development of the ideal product-qua-book—a paradoxical and self-defeating exercise, given that by its very definition a new aesthetic must shock and surprise.

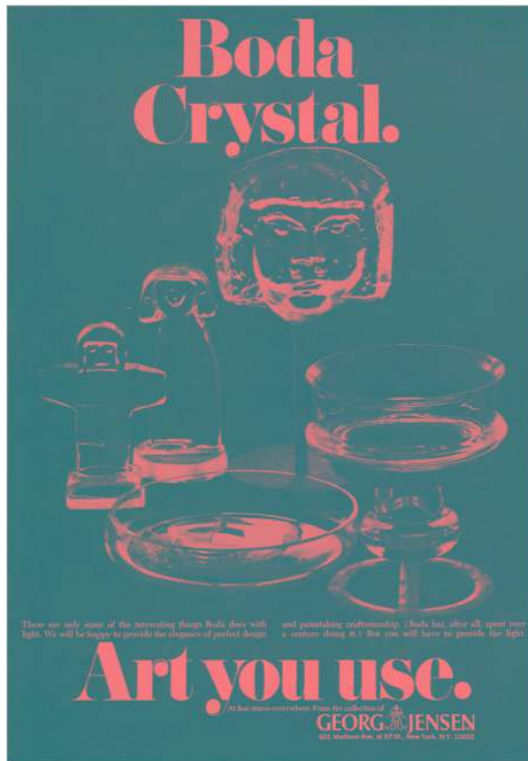
24

Question 8, "Would you like a war?" is particularly telling in this regard. Potentially referring to the reader's predilection for violent conflict in literature, it can also be interpreted as gauging the reader's views on America's involvement in Vietnam—a reference to the treatment of war as entertainment as well as to the tendency of market researchers to advise companies to adapt their messaging based on the ideological and political views of their target audience.

25

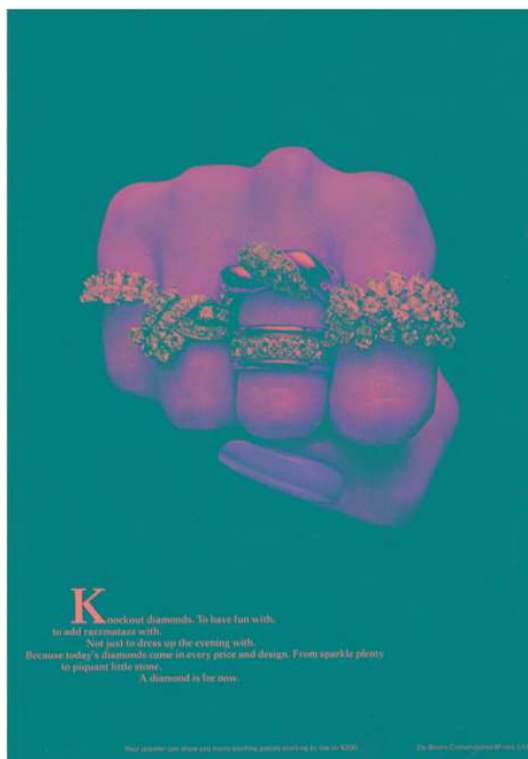
A true descendent of the historical avant-garde, Barthelme grapples with the repercussions of treating works of art as commodities to be valued or disposed of. One is reminded of Barthelme's bemused acknowledgement, in interview, of the fact that his short stories published in *The New Yorker* were inevitably flanked by advertisements for luxury products. In a context in which a vitriolic piece of fiction titled "The Rise of Capitalism" can be interrupted by ads for luxury watches and yachts, it is perhaps not so unrealistic to imagine a novel being interrupted by an invitation to the reader to rate their customer experience. The 12 December 1970 edition of *The New Yorker*, in which "The Rise of Capitalism" was first published, also features full-page print advertisements for brands including Boda Crystal and DeBeers Diamonds. The tagline of the former, "Art you use," suggests the objects' value lies in their utility—where most art has no purpose, here is art with which to impress one's guests (see fig. 1). The tagline of the DeBeers ad, "Diamonds are for now," is a tongue-in-cheek reference to "Diamonds are forever," the slogan De Beers coined in the late 1940s to promote diamonds as the only suitable gem for an engagement ring (Howard, 49-59). Where the original tagline promoted diamonds as a symbol of enduring love, the 1970 ad plays on conspicuous consumption (the many rings gracing the knuckles in the photograph) and instant gratification (see fig. 2).

Figure 1



"Art you use." Boda Crystal, *The New Yorker*, 12 December 1970, p. 59

Figure 2



"Diamonds are for now." DeBeers, *The New Yorker*, 12 December 1970, p. 62

26

The world Barthelme seeks to represent is a world in which works of art are products to be consumed or, more frequently, disregarded entirely—as attested by the depiction of Paul (the “prince-figure” who paints) upon completing a painting:

‘It is a new thing I just finished today, still a little wet I’m afraid.’... Paul leaned the new thing up against our wall for a moment. The new thing, a dirty great banality in white, poor-white and off-white, leaned up against the wall. ‘Interesting,’ we said. ‘It’s poor,’ Snow White said.... ‘Yes,’ Paul said, ‘one of my poorer things I think.’ ‘Not so poor of course as yesterday’s, poorer on the other hand than some,’ she said. ‘Yes,’ Paul said, ‘it has some of the qualities of poorness.’ ‘Especially poor in the lower left-hand corner,’ she said. ‘Yes,’ Paul said, ‘I would go so far as to hurl it into the marketplace.’ (Barthelme, 1967, 54)

- 27 Never referred to as a painting or a work of art, Paul’s “thing” is dismissed in the same breath as it is acknowledged—and once its poor quality has been determined it is relegated, not to the dust-bin, but to the marketplace, where any old trash will sell.

28

The passage recalls the ethos underlying Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’Artista* (“Artist’s Shit”)(1961), an installation of ninety sealed tin cans, which, as the title suggests, were each purported to contain thirty grams of the artist’s own excrement, and which cumulatively provided a strident response to the commercialization of art. For Jon Thompson, Manzoni’s packaged excrement is a metaphor for “the work of art as fully incorporated raw material, and its violent expulsion as commodity” (45). In a not dissimilar fashion to Paul, who chooses to “hurl” his painting into the dust bin-marketplace, “Manzoni understood the creative act as part of the cycle of consumption: as a constant reprocessing, packaging, marketing, consuming, reprocessing, packaging, *ad infinitum*” (45). In this particular case, the market value of Manzoni’s work remains tied to whether critics believe the cans to contain faeces, and whether those faeces are the artist’s—two points that have never been confirmed either way. Meanwhile, the Thompsonian notion of value accrual, whereby an artwork gains value over time, eventually becoming a “durable,” are rendered absurd in a manner akin to Barthelme’s joke: is the reader really to believe that fifty-year-old faeces are any more valuable than fresh ones?

29

It should be noted that in a 1976 interview with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman, Barthelme himself claimed not to be “overly fond of” conceptual art, commenting that it seemed “entirely too easy” both to understand and to produce (Herzinger, 218). Perhaps for this same reason however his opining on the matter belies a natural understanding of the critique at the heart of Manzoni’s installation: “Had I decided to go into the conceptual-art business I could turn out railroad cars full of that stuff every day” (Herzinger, 218). The expression “turning out railroad cars” full of “stuff” hinges on the same notion communicated by Manzoni’s cans, and is even articulated through the same metaphor: the skill involved in making this particular work, or genre of art, is equivalent to that required by mass production, which is in turn equated with shitting. Both Manzoni’s piece and Barthelme’s passage equate ease of “making” with a lack of quality and a high price tag—essentially assuming good art and a high price to be mutually exclusive. The easily produced, low-quality work of art, once made, can be flung into the market to secure a high fee.

30

In turn, Paul's decision in *Snow White* to "hurl" his "poor" painting into the marketplace anticipates Barthelme's later quip, in "Not Knowing" (1987) about the "seductions of silence," given the speed with which art is appropriated by commercial culture: "it takes, by my estimate, about forty-five minutes for any given novelty in art to travel from the Mary Boone Gallery on West Broadway to the display windows of [the luxury women's clothing retailer] Henri Bendel on Fifty-seventh street" (18; 19). It also recalls the writer's own description, in an interview with Jerome Klinkowitz, of Harold Rosenberg's "anxious object," which asks, upon completion: "Am I masterpiece or simply a pile of junk?" (Herzinger, 204). As in the passages discussed thus far, Barthelme inverts our understanding of value and suggests that it is through commodification (or technological efficiency, as in the case of the DDT) that things become waste. The marketplace in late capitalism is an immense dustbin, the objects circulating in it financially valuable but frequently void of aesthetic or semantic worth.

31

*Snow White* extends the historical avant-garde's experimentations with language and form to critique the rhetoric of market research, advertising, and finance, and to debunk the myths of post-war consumerism. Barthelme carries on the avant-garde's legacy by placing waste at the centre of this critique. By tracing the many paths objects travel on their way to and from the landfill and the frequency with which things under capitalism gain and lose value, Barthelme shows waste to be a fluid category that underscores the tenuousness of capitalism's ascriptions of worth. In turn, the unique ways in which his characters put waste to (often comic) use evidence the enduring potential for countercultural literature to give voice to other discourses and throw into relief the humor at the heart of our systemic failures.

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## NOTES

- i. For a sense of readings following this vein, see McCaffery 1982, 99-150; du Plessis 1988, 443-458; Montresor 1989, 74-84; and Sloboda, 109-23.
- ii. For an insight into Douglasian readings of waste in literature, see Gee 2009; Morrison 2015; Viney 2013.
- iii. For an in-depth account of these changes, see Harvey 2005, 141-188 and Harvey 2005, 1-38.
- iv. For examples of readings of Barthelme and the avant-garde, see Nel 2002, 73-95; and Sierra 2013, 153-171. Among the most useful studies of Barthelme's relationship to postmodernism is Maltby's *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Pynchon, Coover* (1991), which focuses specifically on the ideological challenge posed by Barthelme's experimentations with form.
- v. The most famous articulations of this view are Bürger 1984 (1974); Habermas 1981, 3-14; and Jameson 1991. For an insight into the discussion more broadly, see Hobbs 2000, particularly 119-123 and Sim 1998.

vi. For an excellent account of the history of market research from the immediate aftermath of the World War I to the present see Ardivissov 2003, 1-19. Ardivissov notes that the sector's exponential growth throughout the 1950s coincided with its establishment as a scientific discipline. Accessed 5 January 2016.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper examines the relationship between material waste, late capitalism, and the language and structure of Donald Barthelme's fiction, with particular attention to *Snow White* (1967). Going against established modes of allegorizing the theme of waste in Barthelme's work, I suggest the fruitfulness of a literal reading, and propose that his waste objects are framed as inevitable outcomes of a successful advertising campaign. They are the physical evidence or counterpart to the lexicons of marketing and advertising that so preoccupied the author. Such a reading is particularly apt given that Barthelme's early fiction coincided with the birth of the environmental movement, and builds on recent scholarship in the fields of New Materialism and waste studies. By examining Barthelme's depictions of waste through the dual lens of New Materialism and waste studies, and in relation to the work of his contemporaries as well as the literary experimentations of earlier avant-gardists, the paper establishes the different ways in which Barthelme articulates value.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** advertising, capitalism, commodification, consumerism, Donald Barthelme, environmentalism, re-use, recycling, waste

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